

Overton Hygienic Building
3619-3627 South State Street
Chicago

Centered in the vicinity of State and 35th streets on Chicago's Near South Side are surviving properties of what was once a thriving city-within-a-city created by the black community. Referred to by residents as the Metropolis, the community built its own economic, social, and political establishments, directly supported by black enterprise and capital. The development was firmly established by the turn of the century, and it prospered until the 1930s, when the Depression halted its further evolution.

Promoted during its construction as "a monument to Negro thrift and industry," the Overton Hygienic Building, erected by Anthony Overton, a former slave, housed a number of enterprises that met the needs of a growing black community in Chicago. They included the Overton Hygienic Manufacturing Company, a pioneering firm in black cosmetics; the Victory Life Insurance Company; the *Chicago Bee*, a major black newspaper; the *Half Century Magazine*, a black-oriented monthly magazine; and the Douglass National Bank, the first black bank to be granted a national charter. The completion of the Overton Hygienic Building by 1923 provided quarters for Overton's diverse financial empire but also provided the first new rental offices available to black professionals, making the building the prime business address in Black Metropolis.

The Douglass National Bank and Victory Life Insurance Company were on the first floor of the building. Second floor tenants included the Theater Owners Booking Association, which managed and booked black stage acts; Walter T. Bailey, Chicago's first black architect, who in 1926 designed the 80-story Pythian Temple at State Street and 37th Place; and Overton's son-in-law, Dr. Julian H. Lewis, professor of pathology at the University of Chicago. The Overton Hygienic Manufacturing Company, one of the foremost producers of black cosmetics, with sales distribution extending as far as Egypt, Liberia, and Japan, was housed on the third floor. The Overton Hygienic Building also housed the *Half Century Magazine*, a variety magazine aimed at the black audience that included fiction, news reports, homemaking features, and essays on the problems of succeeding in black business ventures. For his significant business achievements, Anthony Overton was honored with two awards for his advancement of black business, the Spingarn Medal in 1927 and the Harmon Business Award in 1928. The Great Depression, however, caused the demise of the Douglass Bank, leaving Overton with the *Chicago Bee* and his cosmetics firm. [Black Metropolis TR, A 4/30/86, 86001091]